Flat Stevie Smith

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In "Scorpion" (1972), by the poet and novelist Stevie Smith (1902-71), the speaker fastidiously curates the flatness and emptiness of the heavenly space to which she would like God to call her:

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 593)

Scorpion fussily arranges everything to her own satisfaction. She empties all animals and buildings meticulously out of paradise, leaving only the flat, "quite empty" spaces of sea and grass. Stripping away the agents of narrative and event, this view now yields nothing. And this failure to offer a result is compelling, precisely because that flatness involved so much labor to produce. Effort and meticulous styling produce nothing, in the end, to look at. It is that contradiction that holds the eye, that makes the space heavenly.

Throughout Smith's writing, flat empty spaces fascinate her characters, and are offered up to readers. Her critics, in turn, lean on the word "flat" as an interpretative lever for her challenging work. Applied to Smith's poetry, "flat" may invoke her lack of stylistic ornamentation, or else her ambiguous tone.[1] All these meanings, distinct but connected, indicate an emotional and communicative parsimony. Smith's work is "flat," variously, because it seems to afford little interpretative traction. Dwelling on a flat expanse, like many of her poems, "Scorpion" unsettles critical toolkits, coupling nursery rhyme cadences and childlike diction (the speaker's italics are as stroppy as a teenager's) with a dense literary and emotional ambiguity. Smith's poetry seems too complex to overlook, but too simple to interpret. She sits uneasily against a modernist context that tends to privilege complexity and obscurity, between the positions of major and minor twentieth-century writer. The reflexive critical response is to designate her work "fausse-naive" (Larkin 1983: 153), or "deceptively simple" (Sternlicht 1991: 26), redeemable through a revelation of secret depth.[2] But this search for "richness"—the most valuable currency of the humanities, as Heather Love (2010: 371) notes—does not always yield coherent results for a writer whose diverse and often internally contradictory texts evade overarching interpretations, even as they invite them.[3] In short, Stevie Smith structures her writing to promise a depth that ultimately escapes articulation. The landscape looks tempting, but we struggle to dig down far below the surface. What was offered freely, on the flat exterior, seems to be all that there is to find.

This essay proposes that the language of the "flat," in all its senses, offers a route into Stevie Smith's puzzling and unsettling prose and poetry. It unpacks the idea of the "flat"—a word that claims implicitly that there is nothing to unpack—to foreground the diversity of flatness's associated emotions, as well as its capacity to draw and retain sight. Smith's interest in these qualities hints, I argue, that we cannot read her poetry cohesively unless we draw out the breadth of the aesthetic and interpretative connotations that flatness holds for her. Doing so, I suggest, offers a critical language with which to approach other twentieth century writers as well, such as D. H. Lawrence, whose writing, like Smith's, eludes interpretative paradigms that privilege concealment, precisely because of its repetitive insistence that it has already made everything necessary abundantly available to the reader's eye.

Beginning with an examination of how feeling flat involves, for Smith, a set of emotions more diverse and complex than just depression, this essay moves into outlining how flat landscapes offer Smith a mode of lingering habitation that is appealing precisely because it provides nothing to hold the viewer's attention. Playing these ideas off the recent model of "surface reading," the essay makes a case for dwelling on flat surfaces even in those of Smith's poems that do not emphasize them in their narratives or descriptions. It closes with a consideration of how a study of flatness might contribute to larger discussions around modernist writing.

Feeling Flat

Developing a tradition of topographical poetry that began with John Denham's "Cooper's Hill" (1642), the eighteenth century established mountains firmly as the site of the poetic event, of the emotional surges that tradition would foreground and value. Height itself offered Edmund Burke (1998: 66) a key to the sublime in 1757, especially if that perpendicular was "rugged and broken" like a cliff. William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1799-1850) pays rapt attention to the crags around Windermere, the Alps, and finally Snowdon: the "lonely Mountain" (1991: 315) that becomes the site for divine and poetic meditation in the thirteenth book, an analogue for the mind itself. In "Hymn Before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni" (1802), Coleridge's speaker addresses Mont Blanc:

> I gazed upon thee, Till thou, still present to the bodily sense, Didst vanish from my thought: (2000: 118)

Later, facing the same mountain "piercing the infinite sky" (1989: 545) in Shelley's poem of 1816, to his speaker "all seems eternal now" (546). And that focus on mountains as the appropriate site for literary attention has lasted into the twentieth century, both in literature itself as in, for example, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* [1924]), and in studies of the cultural production of the period. Robert Macfarlane (2003: 160), for instance, positions mountains as a site where flat, unhappy moods can be remedied, and Christopher Morris (2012) explores the German cult of mountains in art music and cinema.

Other kinds of spaces have seemed, in contrast, less rewarding. Where flat expanses appear, they're often nightmarish, as in Coleridge's (2000: 52) purgatorial "painted ocean" in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or W. H. Auden's "Plains" (1955): "I cannot see a plain without a shudder: / "O God, please, please, don't ever make me live there!" (1976: 432). Yet Auden does "live" there, for the duration of the text, in the rooms of nine stanzas. Something about the plains keeps his speaker in place: perhaps the "shudder[ing]" terror of the landscape itself, like a snake's glance paralyzing its prey. This power is reflected in a growing range of critical texts on flatness. Steven Connor's "Flat Life" (2001) contends that the modern world "depends upon a flat apprehension," for instance, and B. W. Higman's *Flatness* (2017) investigates level landscapes in the sciences and social sciences, centering its analysis on the double public view of such landscapes as "highly desired yet frequently disparaged" (9). Earlier, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) associates flatness with secrets. Used as an organizing principle, they suggest, secrets become thinner and more ubiquitous until form and content dissolve into each other, and nothing is left to hide. And in J. Hillis Miller's essay, "Derrida's Topographies" (1994: 18), even as the surface seems to hide nothing, it maintains a similar opacity: "To say the secret is all on the surface is to say that it generates the illusion of hiding a secret at some fathomless depth." For Deleuze and Guattari, and for Miller via Derrida, flatness becomes associated not with a lack of value or content but with a particular *kind* of content whose profoundly evasive interest inheres in that open revelation.

This ambivalence of flatness—fascinatingly dull, emptily full— certainly appeals to Stevie Smith, whose descriptions of flat topographies merge seamlessly into flat affects. In a stanza she tellingly repeats in two poems, "The Frozen Lake" (1962) and "Angel Face" (1966), she writes:

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 455, 563)

Circling mesmerized around this unyielding space, Smith couples "flat" and "vacant" to make the landscape invoke a recurrent set of emotional and narrative paralyses: failure, emotional withdrawal, loss of interest, loss of energy, loss of hope. Flatness happens when things are finished, as with the deathly line on a heart monitor. In "Will Man Ever Face Fact and Not Feel Flat?" (1957), Christianity appears as nothing but a fairy tale—but beyond that fairy tale lies only flatness: the disappointment of a bleak, godless world. Carrying an expectedly gloomy weight, flatness here signals depression and fatigue of a sort that pervade Smith's life and writing.

At the same time, Smith's introduction to "Will Man Ever Face Fact and Not Feel Flat?" in her essay "The Necessity of Not Believing" complicates this portrayal of flatness. Though it still seems something to be endured rather than enjoyed—[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] she sighs—Smith enlarges on what that putting up with might entail. Flatness becomes positively enjoyable, rather than a depressed opting-out from feeling:

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright].[4]

If flatness suggests a failure to hope, it may also offer a refuge from a tiring world: its prospect may insulate one from the demand to act or to be cheerful, as a vast blank space of geological time dilutes the burden of the individual moment. Flatness, for Stevie Smith, becomes a space to [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright], to relax into and rest undisturbed.

Inhabiting flatness, then, offers the blessing of potential indifference to oneself within the wider human pattern. One presumably takes a cue from the [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] that blows across the featureless wastes of geological time, dissipating human pretension. Flatness may provide safety from the precipices and potential falls recurring in Smith's work, as in "Harold's Leap" (1950):

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 267)

Smith praises Harold's courage here, but often her speakers respond to challenges by wishing they were dead instead.[5] Remaining flat is safer than risking disappointment or failure. So in Smith's fable of human creation in "From the Coptic," the red clay refuses to get up and become "Man." Instead, it [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (324). Only when the clay is promised eventual death does it rise up and take form as human. Only when insured by the promise of future flatness—which can be redeemed whenever it likes—will it consent to embark on life.

So desirable is neutralized experience, in Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), that for the protagonist Pompey, it becomes the stuff of daydream. Nodding drearily over her office work, stretched thin by too many friends, she entertains two fantasies. The first centers on a field [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] that [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*NYP* 26). In the second, Pompey walks along a road that becomes flatter and flatter. Trees and road and track give way, until [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (58). She arrives in a deserted house, where a good meal has been left for her, and after she has eaten, she can prepare for bed—for, as so often in Smith's work (see, for instance, 1979: 202), events lead up to a blissful sleep:

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (60)

Pompey reiterates the bed's flatness twice. It is puritanical: hard, one meager pillow, no headboard or footboard, but left perfectly and starkly prepared. Without anything to focus on, the bed still seduces us with a chanted cycle of repeating detail: high, flat, flat, high. There is nothing more to say. And indeed, early in the novel, Pompey announces that [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (3). We recognize, in this passage, the same sense of the superfluity of further additions. Pompey's bed is a fantasy zone in which all that there was to do has been done.

This affect should not be collapsed easily into depression. To wish for a release from work or effort is pathologizable only in a context that roots human value in a

desire to strive and to produce. Flat spaces feel like home to Smith's speakers, allowing an escape from the demands of emotionally heightened social performance, absolving them of the need to act, feel, react, work, or try. And what results is, strangely, an animated pleasure and relish. Flatness provides a space in which the clearing away of emotional cues and stimuli has, somehow, stimulated its own kind of affect: one that is focused without a focus, and lively in its lifelessness.

Spared from the duty to have emotional reactions, granted the privilege of residing in the realm of an afterthought (everything necessary having already been achieved), Smith's speakers are free to explore modes of communication made available by the affects associated with flat spaces. In an introduction to one of her performances, kept in her archive, she describes her long poem "The House of Over-Dew" in topographical-affective terms:

> [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright].[6]

Pronouncing the poem [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] Smith seems first to refer to its reluctance to lift into climax: one event following another, leisurely and without apparent consequence. The poem appends incidents without assigning emotional and narrative significance:

> [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 641)

The responsibility for excitement and tangible event lifts: the flatness of this plot resides, to quote Adorno's (1992: 135) description of Holderlin, in "that supreme passivity that found its formal correlative in the technique of seriation." Each incident is cast as an afterthought— incidental, irrelevant to an (evacuated) main narrative, simply marking time in a space that exists outside patterns of narrative importance.

When Smith describes arranging the poem for several voices, however, she does so in terms of the "flat statement"—a statement being made, then followed by another, bringing in another piece of just-remembered knowledge. A "flat statement" offers itself in a tone that alienates everything that precedes or follows it. It is self-sufficient: it refuses mutual dependence or debate. One remark can join another without visible connection, as soon as it is called to mind, a non sequitur rather than a response.

This lack of responsiveness—where a statement is made but not followed up, not graced with the explicit recognition as significant, as worth attending to and recuperating, which absorption into a cohesive and connected narrative would offer—foregrounds the sadness of the poem. "The House of Over-Dew" is about repeated failed attempts to get what one wants. Cynthia loses Georgie, the Minnims lose their savings on their wild scheme, Georgie does not get the Oxford post that he hopes for. The final line of the poem is part of a Latin prayer that Cynthia reads to her class. [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] she cries, but no love is forthcoming; the cry remains there, baldly unanswered, on the page. Mirroring this indifferent world, Smith's flat (unemotional, emphatic) delivery of a family's

downfall deflates the affective potential of what she describes, limiting the reader's ability to feel or express pity. To render this poem as one disconnected comment after another reflects its aesthetic of unsuccess: the way one abortive bid for advancement follows another. Flatly presenting flat statements attenuates our emotional reaction to the very average disappointments that this poem describes, caused by nothing and of no real significance to the world: failed engagements, failed careers, the loss of savings, the drudgery of washing dishes. The detached speaker remarks on these facts but limits their capacity to move us. Rather than magnifying the quotidian into something transformative or important, Smith's flatness allows her to explore the everyday while keeping it, firmly, in its place. These descriptions of perfectly mundane heartbreak are not allowed to build into anything greater, each remaining contained in the extent of the emotional demand it makes on the reader.

Flat tones and feelings, then, offer Smith's speakers a way of escaping the work of experiencing and manifesting heightened emotions. Those are held in the periphery of attention but corralled and absorbed, positioning one at a safe angle to and distance from suffering. Leveling the peaks of emotion, Smith ensures that feeling is always just missed. Indeed, we can say that flatness is the aesthetic of the just missed.

Viewers of a flat landscape scan almost urgently for something to look at. If the eye lights on a focal point, however, it interrupts the encounter with the blank expanse. A smooth surface—ironed linen, ice, a polished table—elicits the powerful impulse to run hands over it. Doing so, one is both looking and not looking for the imperfection, the interruption of flatness. Finding the knotted thread, the gnarl in the wood, is disappointing; the smoothness was not perfect. If one's hands do not find such an interruption, they go on, nevertheless, seeking it. It is this scanning movement—returning over and over again to the same ground, seeking without finding or wishing to find—which identifies a pleasurable encounter with physical flatness. This circling motion is repetitive, slightly uneasy, fascinated. It encodes, I suggest, a sense of encounter always just missed (the postulated knot or gnarl that one is always orienting, ambivalently, toward). Edmund Burke (1998: 66) associated the sublime with vastness and infinity—qualities that both a level landscape and a plunging cliff might possess—but he warned, "an hundred yards of even ground will never work such an effect as a tower an hundred yards high." Flatness, then, is sublimity missed: a ghost version, demanding attention without supplying fully what its features promised. That disappointment holds the encounter with flatness short of the possibility of satisfaction. If we are accustomed to positioning value and interest in depths, in the sensation of a plunge downward, flatness may be uncanny, and fascinating, and frightening precisely because it—like much of Smith's absurdly, unsettlingly "simple" writing—keeps the attention longer than we can rationally justify.

Nothing to Keep Us: Inhabiting Flatness

The account of modernist writing as a kind of literature where the focal point or "accent" does not fall where we expect is well established. "The accent falls differently from of old," Virginia Woolf (2008: 9) writes in "Modern Fiction." In "Women and Fiction," Woolf uses the "accent" to stand in for event: a happening that leaves some kind of trace: "Often nothing tangible remains of a woman's day ..... Where does the accent fall? What is the salient point for the novelist to seize upon? It is difficult to say" (137). Much modernist literature—and certain strands of modernist criticism—revolves around the question of what to make of periods in which nothing seems to happen. For Lorraine Sim (2010: 13), Ben Highmore (2002: 12), and Henri Lefebvre (2000: 2), for instance, such literature frames the mundane as in fact secretly exciting (just as Smith is described as "deceptively simple"). For Liesl Olson (2009: 4) and Michael Sayeau (2013: 44), in contrast, the ordinary remains ordinary, without climax and offering forth no revelation. Where Joyce's "epiphanies" might promise to weight small moments with sublime meaning, Sayeau argues that they do not keep this promise; they move "busily but to no end," simulating but refusing development.

The study of the modernist everyday, then, calls into question an established hierarchy of significance about peaks and troughs, events and non-events, activity and emptiness. If much modernist literature obscures the effects of that disruption—distracts us from it, with an accumulation of stuff and of minor events—some modernist writing in fact positions it as a central issue. Where the aesthetics of Joyce's epiphanies produces what Sayeau describes a "flatness of surface," in Joyce this flatness is disguised. Other writers such as Stevie Smith and D. H. Lawrence, to name just two, flaunt it openly. They turn it into the unsettling primary descriptor of their content and style, often critically acknowledged but not always seriously investigated.

Pompey describes the flat bed in *Novel on Yellow Paper* in a "flat" style. Circling around the word "flat," the description keeps attention on the image of that bare bed, stalling the narrative as we linger on in a space where, as in Smith's poem "Thoughts about the Person from Porlock," [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 446). All that happens in this paragraph is that Pompey goes on to make herself horizontal too, and then goes to sleep, with [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*NYP* 26). But looping through short, insistent clauses, the prose keeps readers on the verge of a climactic revelation—one that never arrives. Nourished by very little new detail, it sustains a demand for its readers' attention, its phrases implying a revelation is just-forthcoming, even as it is continually deferred.

Stevie Smith shares this style with D. H. Lawrence. Her debt to him emerges both on a general level—part of *Novel on Yellow Paper* reworks a section of his *Apocalypse* (1931)—and in specific stylistic traits, as when we juxtapose the passage from *Novel* with one from Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* (1920):

> She [Alvina] found Albert quite unattractive. He was tall and thin and

> brittle, with a pale, rather dry, flattish face, and with curious pale eyes. His impression was one of uncanny flatness, something like a lemon sole. Curiously flat and fish-like he was, one might have imagined his back-bone to be spread like the back-bone of a sole or a plaice. His teeth were sound, but rather large and yellowish and flat. A most curious person. (1981: 63)

Alvina studies the unattractive Albert longer than his "flattish face" seems to merit, four sentences repeating, in the same words, what we already know: Albert is flat, his face is flat, everything about him is flat. Yet Alvina is "curious," and the repetition of that word too signals that something about Albert merits our lingering attention. Moving through the text, lifted by "curios[ity]," the same conclusion offers itself again and again—Albert is flat, nothing to see, nothing interesting. Nevertheless, that conclusion keeps itself in play. The text revolves unfinishably and inexplicably around a scene that ostensibly lacks anything to "keep us."

The same dynamic informs Smith's "The Engine Drain" (1957), a poem very interested in horizontal topographies. It draws, displaces, and repels our attention in a way that seems to make the text amount to very little: a perverse (mis)management of readerly attention that has seemed to steer critics away from this poem. Repetition directs one's gaze insistently but illegibly to its subjects: [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 364). Sky and sea are both blue; there is little to let us know at any given point whether we are looking at one or the other. What is emphatically revealed is what we already know (of course the sea is blue) and featureless (flat). We have full visibility, but of nothing—and yet the poem goes on urging us to find it interesting.

The waters of the inland sea are worth our attention, Smith signals, because they are "All blue and flat," spread out magnificently to the eye. But when the drain removes these, little has changed. Flat sea gives way to flat land:

> [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 366)

The push and pull of "The Engine Drain" derives from the urgent, even breathless direction of readerly attention toward something that fails to make a case for itself: to rise to the occasion, to be diverting or eye-catching. If draining the sea might seem to promise a revelation of something new beneath the flat surface, the revelation is of nothing, a kind of swiz: under the surface of the featureless sea is featureless land. Here, and across Smith's writing, then, flatness works to insist on a central strangeness in her work: attempts to parse its meaning return us to a surface that signaled, all along, that there was nothing further to uncover.

How should we read an author who so strenuously frustrates our attempts to find or establish depth in her writing? Smith positions her texts as pure surface without depth (flat) but also as a demanding, insistent surface to which we should pay attention (her work presents itself flatly). One response might be to turn to Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's (2009: 2) notion of "surface reading." Surface reading moves, via Anne-Lise Francois's (2008) conception of the "open secret,"

toward experimentation with what Eve Sedgwick (2003: 126), to qualify the claims of her earlier work, calls non-paranoid ways of reading texts. The approach begins by refusing to assume that the text is hiding something (coded sexuality, hidden feminist subversion), which the critic must then winkle out. Surface reading can entail, among other things, an attentive and detailed account of what is open to view in the text. As Heather Love (2013: 412) frames it, "surface reading . . . is descriptive; it defers virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the text is *like*.

The idea that it is possible to present an objectively "accurate account" of a text is evidently problematic. Ellen Rooney (2010: 123) rebuts the point by noting that reading is always mediated by ideology and Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt (2014: 4) point out that the embeddedness of metaphorical instincts make the literal very elusive, rather than a given. Tracing the history of the surface back into antiquity, Bruce Holsinger (2011: 601) queries the notion that the surface is ever wholly evident and apprehensible. While we may dispute the more extreme claims of surface reading, however, it is hard to argue with the point that, within criticism's wide spectrum, there are readings that are more descriptive, and readings that are less so. One does not exclude the other, and different approaches may illuminate different qualities in texts and authors. Surface reading, as Ronan McDonald (2018: 368) emphasizes, "is not a putsch but an extension of the franchise"; there is space for both approaches.

For Stevie Smith's work, reading for the surface—attending to the unprepossessing or emptied parts of her texts—reveals both how closely it is concerned with flatness and how, for her, flatness operates more than as a shorthand for depressed or blank feelings. This understanding informs the next part of this essay: a close reading of Smith's poem "I rode with my darling . . . ," from her 1950 collection *Harold's Leap*. Bringing together the questions of affect and attention raised in the first two sections, here I argue that this poem models the reading experience of poised but mystified encounter with a bare surface that withholds interpretative depth.

Pledged to the Plain

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 296)

Romana Huk (1997: 161) notes the similarity of Smith's "I rode with my darling . . ." to Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855), both terminating with the fateful discovery of a tower. In Smith's poem, the speaker leaves her husband in the dark wood to pursue an angel, departing from her conventional role. When the second half of the poem does not pass judgement on her decision to escape her darling, Huk suggests that Smith's characters engage in dialogue with patriarchally complicit instructional voices without committing to their view or indeed any other. I want to add to Huk's reading by pausing before

tackling the moments in this poem that seem pregnant with symbolic suggestion (angel, darling, wood, tower), and instead paying attention to its more muted, invisible episodes.

"Childe Roland" traces Roland's solitary journey across a plain in his quest for the Tower. In Smith's "I rode with my darling . . . ," the speaker discovers a tower, unexpectedly, after a key encounter with the topographical flatness that characterizes the landscape of Browning's poem. Smith's reworking of "Childe Roland" hinges, I argue, on this repositioning of flatness as narratively interesting in itself, rather than an indication that narrative is flagging. The earlier poem is ghosted by Roland's hope for an event: the possibility of escaping from the blankness of the empty plain by reaching the vertical Dark Tower. Smith's rendition, however, rewrites how we are to receive flatness. The empty cornfield that her protagonist finds elicits only a neutral response, with no expectation that things might ever be otherwise.

Browning's Roland is bewildered by the unvarying landscape: he cannot believe that what he sees is all that there is. Without the organization of landmarks, he finds himself in a panicky interpretative impasse. Locating the question of interpretation at the heart of Browning's poem, Harold Bloom (1975: 106) writes that "Roland rides with us as interpreter," yet "his every interpretation is a powerful misreading." These interpretive efforts are focused on the bare plain:

> Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood, Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth Desperate and done with (Browning 1995: 147)

Here, Roland differentiates between categories of horizontal land, opposing "marsh" to "mere earth." He struggles to assign them origin stories that would at least build in a historical topographical variation. But his struggle fails. He comes to an interpretative and discursive halt—a landscape that is "done with." It inclines toward nothing and does nothing: it is lifelessly flat.

Roland finds the landscape psychologically unacceptable because it refuses variation so adamantly. It enforces its own level: "If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk / Above its mates, the head was chopped" (142). This is a landscape struggling and failing to be inflected, to be inclined in both senses: to have gradient, as well as the desire that propels plot. Though Roland's attention lingers, he can find no "safe road," no content to interpret that would confer topographic variation and secure depth of meaning on what he sees. All he can do is "go on" (141): try to find the Tower, a vertical alternative to the flatness he is trying to resist.

Reworking Browning's poem in "I rode with my darling . . . ," Smith pointedly omits Roland's interpretive struggle. As in many of her texts, Smith here cuts out all connective tissue. Events simply happen, without explanation. The speaker had wanted to stay in the dark wood, but then rides [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] after her darling; instead of her darling, she finds a cornfield, on which she gazes for a few moments; then she rides into the dark wood. Why does she do any of these things? What does she make of what she sees? In contrast to Browning's poem, Smith's text strips interpretative labor from its plot. The protagonist allows

her experiences to remain empty both of tangible motive and implication.

Given the narrative (and perhaps, in passing, affective) flatness of her protagonist, contrasting with Browning's anguished hero, it is appropriate that Smith allows her poem to turn on a single, spotlighted encounter with a horizontal topography:

> [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 296)

In a poem that opened in medias res, within a dark thicket of poetic plot anticipating revelation, the speaker now bursts upon an area of flatness. She finds neither the angel nor the darling whom she expects. Though this episode is clearly open to view in the poem, it has passed without significant critical comment. The cornfield refuses to yield to probing. Nothing happens in the field, except [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright]. When the corn speaks, it adds nothing new, only the poem's well-trodden refrain. The scene is innocent, simple, hiding nothing and yielding nothing; it is both topographically and interpretatively flat.

Stark and open, the cornfield impresses itself upon the speaker's consciousness. Yet Smith defuses the capacity of this moment to be experienced as explosive or significant. Throughout, her half-rhymes slow and weigh down the poem.

> [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (296)

Laid simply on the ends of the lines, with their lumpy syllables left unworked, [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright], [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright], [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright], and [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] weigh the poem down; prevent it from lifting into sharpness and clarity. Across the lines, also, half-rhymes and echoes disrupt the auditory hierarchy that tends to position significance at a line-ending: [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright], partway through the line, rhymes more exactly with [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] than the latter's counterpart, [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright]. So Smith takes her poem beyond bathos, which depends on an abrupt fall into flatness. Instead, she generates a pervasive mood of preemptive anticlimax: anticlimax before climax could ever have a chance to occur.

Smith ensures that the featureless cornfield stays narratively flat—not noticeably lifting into dramatic climax—by visibly refusing to hinge the moment on the word "suddenly." The poem depends on things being sudden, or—unexpectedly—not being sudden. So the angel appears [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright]: [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright], impressive and dramatic. In contrast, [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] floats near the appearance of the cornfield but is not attached to it: the speaker rode [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright]after her darling, [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright]." The cornfield is not experienced as "sudden," then, although it appears suddenly in the poem, with no apparent function or connection to anything that precedes or follows. It is unexpected for the speaker, who hesitates there. But, ghosted by that word, it is no more than almost "sudden."

E. M. Forster (2005: 81) suggested in *Aspects of the Novel* that a character in fiction is flat if it is not capable of surprising in a convincing way. Smith's description of flatness in "I rode with my darling" casts both the "surprising" and the "convincing" into doubt. Surprise is evaded and displaced (physically, on the line); the speaker's unexplained ride after her darling, and her hesitation before an innocent-seeming cornfield, seem deliberately too minimal to convince. There is a sense here of revelation that has let out its own air, which levels its climactic potential in the moment that it materializes. But despite its emotional and physical flatness, despite its noticeable failure to be "sudden," the cornfield, in its minimal way, makes something happen. Neither the angel nor the darling could induce narrative climax. Gazing at the cornfield, however, as it insists flatly on itself, Smith's speaker comes to a decision. In a dramatically rendered two lines, she rides with finality into the dark wood:

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (*CPD* 296)

The cornfield causes an experience of impasse. When she asks it, [quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] it replies only with the mute, nonteleological motion of the wind moving the corn. In that unanswered or obliquely answered question—in that failure of the narrative or the landscape to rise to the occasion, to be what was needed—something was revealed to Smith's speaker. She does not annotate the experience; poker-faced, she rides into the wood.

Finding a tower in that wood, the speaker then vocalizes the emotional neutrality that has pervaded the whole poem:

[quotation redacted for reasons of copyright] (297)

The speaker's answers to her own questions are tonally flat. They balance between yes and no: falling flat, or short of what she elicits. We are kept on the surface, never allowed to settle into interpretation. Flatness has led not to catastrophe or anguish, nor Childe Roland's dramatic note on his slughorn, but simply to more flatness. 'Stones that "resist without belief" do not fall and vanish, anticlimactically. They go on embodying the contradiction, the dilemma, of flat poetics: which insist on themselves, refuse to conceal themselves, even as they affectlessly refuse to lift out of listlessness. Flatness provides a language for Smith's texts: daring us to interpret them, they nevertheless refuse to privilege any interpretative handle, remaining mute on the subject of their own significance. And yet they urge us, like Roland, to go on: our eyes remain on them, waiting for something to happen, resisting without belief.

Flatness states something strongly but resists interpretation of that strongly stated declaration. It establishes itself as the end of sight, an interpretative and narrative endpoint: a space in which nothing else remains to be done. In a flat textual landscape, Stevie Smith makes new kinds of affect and behavior possible: acts that expect to have no consequence, expressions of emotion that make no bids for sympathy, that bear an improper or illegible relationship both to their apparent causes and to what comes afterward.

1 Attending to flatness in Stevie Smith's work, I suggest, offers not only a way

of apprehending her elusive style and preoccupations but also a case study for the importance of the trope in twentieth-century writing more broadly. Parsing the experience of inhabiting a flat landscape—an experience often unsettling, lingering, fascinated, puzzlingly focused but curiously enlivened—affords a set of critical terms to help us grapple with writing whose idiosyncratic foci and approaches position them outside the main currents of modernist studies. Indeed, such terms might shed new light on writers positioned within them. By embodying and inhabiting flat spaces and styles as neutral or even alluring options, I argue, authors in this period are able to unlock a new affective range, engender a reading experience that is intense but without a single focus, and produce a model of narrative that diffuses climax past the bounds of individual textual moments. Given that, as theorists of the everyday suggest, there might be few narrative peaks to be found even in high modernist writing, this essay proposes a shift of focus toward how we read and dwell in the unpeaked, featureless textual expanses of much twentieth-century literature, in modernism and beyond.

§

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Notes

1. Frances Spalding's (1988: xvi) biography calls Smith's diction "simple, flat and poignant," associating flatness with simplicity, a refusal of the expected poetic ornamentation. Smith's poem "The Suburban Classes," Ged Pope (2015: 111) writes, "adopts an unreadable flat denotation."

2. On this critical response to "simple" writers more broadly, see Diepeveen 2003: 189. For readings that establish Smith's value by positioning her as resisting or exposing patriarchal structures, see Civello 1997 and Severin 1997. For a reading that argues that Smith's novels explore entrapment within oppressive political ideologies, see Huk 2005.

3. On Smith's resistance to coherent interpretations, see Tucker 2014: 336.

4. Stevie Smith Papers, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 15.

5. See, for instance, "If I lie down" (*CPD* 196), "Nourish Me on an Egg" (148), and "Mr Over" (299).

6. Stevie Smith Papers, series 2, box 1, folder 4.

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Abstract

Critics of Stevie Smith's work often lean on the word "flat." Usually, the term is meant to evoke Smith's "simplicity" and lack of ornamentation, her refusal to lift into "poetic resonance," or her unreadable tone. This essay attends more closely to flatness in Smith's work, exploring the ways Smith finds flatness fascinating and proposing that the language of the "flat," in all its senses, offers an illuminating way of grappling with the difficulty of her puzzling and unsettling prose and poetry. It unpacks the idea of the "flat"—a word that claims implicitly that no unpacking remains to be done—foregrounding the diversity of flatness's associated emotions, as well as the ways it remains compelling. Drawing out the breadth of aesthetic and interpretative connotations that flatness holds for her, the essay argues, provides a coherent way of reading her work. Beginning with an examination of how "feeling flat" involves, for Smith, a diverse and complex set of emotions, the essay moves into outlining how flat landscapes offer Smith a mode of lingering habitation that derives its interest precisely from the absence of anything evidently interesting. In the process, it offers a critical language with which to approach other twentieth-century writers, such as D. H. Lawrence, whose work has remained elusive precisely because of its insistence that it has made its meaning abundantly available—that it has nothing to hide.

Keywords

attention, flatness, landscape, simplicity, surface